



After the War: What 'The New Russia' Means for Belarus

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The war in Georgia has been a surprising and even shocking event for politicians, diplomats, and observers across the world. The issue is not about human suffering the war produced, but that a small local conflict is capable to modify the whole system of international relations and to provoke substantial geopolitical change. The attempt of Georgia to reintegrate South Ossetia and the subsequent aggression of Russia resulted in a drastic change of Russia's superpower status. International observers mostly considered Russia as an aggressive force, while the USA called for the exclusion from the G8. In turn, Russia has virtually broken its relations with the NATO. Politicians and experts started to talk about the new 'Cold War', while the neighbors of Russia revise their defense doctrines. For the first time after the collapse of the USSR, Russia is on the brink of international isolation. What are the implications for international relations and Russia's direct neighbors?

Russia as a Threat

For a period of about two decades, countries of the world have been learned not to treat Russia as a threat. After the end of the 'Cold War' and the collapse of the socialist bloc, Russia was a weak, depopulating state of regional importance with a degrading army. The imperial ambitions, not to speak of imperial policies, had been forgotten. Even rising energy prices, macroeconomic stabilization and the export successes have not turned Russia into a threat to international stability. It continued to be a part and parcel of international politics and functioning of international organizations.

Post-soviet foreign policy of Russia contains failures and strategic pitfalls, from the first Chechen war and to the 'colored revolutions'. Russian citizens have used to accept this state of affairs and not expected any decisive responses to the entry of Georgian forces to South Ossetia's capital Tsinvali.

In fact, the Kremlin has been confronted with a tough choice. On the one hand, no intervention of Russia and the absence of its support of South Ossetia could result in the loss of prestige in the eyes of the Caucasian nations and thereby make Georgia somewhat stronger. On the other hand, intervention could inflict serious consequences that are hard to foresee. Nevertheless, Russia opted for the latter. This is not a surprise, given the domestic political developments in Russia and the dynamics of its relations with the Western states. It appears that Russia had been waiting for a proper time to intervene.

The History of Contradictions

The euphoria after the fall of the 'Iron Curtain' and the democratization of Russia did not last long. The same happened with the winds of change inside Russia. Since the middle of the 1990s, there have been divergences of views between Russia and the West, resulting in a number of serious crises in the bilateral relationships. One of the first crises was related to the 'restoration of the constitutional order' in Chechnya (an official label for the military campaign against the Chechen separatists). At that time, the issue of human rights violations in Russia had been discussed internationally. The diplomatic wars with the NATO followed after its Eastward enlargement and the 1999 military operation in Kosovo. Despite the establishment of the Russia-NATO Council, the Alliance has been mentioned in the defence doctrines of Russia as one of the threats. Since September 11, 2001 there was a short period of 'normalization' of the relations between Russia and the West, based on the joint anti-terrorist actions, but it ended soon with a rise of mutual distrust and alienation. These have emerged

due to a series of 'coloured' revolutions in some post-soviet countries. For Russia, these events appeared as a way of the USA to penetrate into the sphere-of-influence. Besides that, the Kremlin has been nervous about the deployment of American anti-ballistic missile systems. The strategic and tactical contradictions have resulted in the Moscow's attempts to create an alternative military-political block on the basis of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) established in 1992. However, this institution has not become a viable counterforce. Instead, the sphere-of-influence of Russia has narrowed down. It is very likely that the narrowing has reached the bottom-line, so the Kremlin reacted in a military way, like in the case of Georgia.

In case the parallels are drawn with the 'Cold War', Putin's 'Fulton speech' occurred in Munich in February 2007.¹ At that time, Putin blamed the West in the double standards approach and the attempts to build uni-polar world order and also grounded the right of Russia to conduct independent foreign policy. Accordingly, antagonism has been made open. Next, Russia has postponed its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. It could be seen as one of the most important contributions to the destruction of the security system established in Europe in the Soviet Union times.

The war in Georgia has become a powerful push for the further deterioration of the relationships between Russia and the West. The participation in the military conflict has made Russia virtually isolated. It has not been explicitly supported by the CIS and the CSTO members. As a result, all of the ties built with the Euro-Atlantic structures over the last decade have been undermined. The North Atlantic Council strongly criticized the actions of Russia and even questioned the very format of Russia-NATO Council.² In response, Russia has stopped the relations with the NATO and withdrawn its envoy to it.³ All joint maneuvers have been abolished, while the functioning of the transit corridor to Afghanistan (offered by Russia to the NATO troops) has been questioned.

The mutual tensions still grow. The Kremlin has officially recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while the NATO continues to increase its military presence in the Black Sea basin. Therefore, the conflict is far from being over.

The Reasons for Isolation

There are longstanding and complicated reasons for the uneasy and contradictory relationships between Russia and the West. They could be found in the nature of the Russia's civilization itself, as explicitly illustrated by George Kennan in his 'Long Telegram'.⁴ In case more immediate historical reasons are considered, favorable external economic environment needs to be recalled. Inflow of foreign exchange due to high oil and gas prices has helped to achieve macroeconomic stabilization and bring the country back to the circle of 'great powers'. Nevertheless, centrifugal tendencies of the 1990s and the absence of democratic traditions have led to the creation of a 'power vertical' and strengthening of the controls over media. These steps were seen as necessary to reintegrate the territories and to consolidate the society. History teaches us that the consolidation of society is better achieved when an imagined or real foe is available, allowing to channel an 'excessive' discontent of citizenry and to increase their loyalty to the state.

Another reason is related to the changes in the West manifested in the Eastward enlargement of the NATO to almost reach the borders of Russia and to incorporate its former allies. This move could not have been ignored by the Kremlin that reacted rather negatively. As soon as this reaction was political and diplomatic, no serious concern was raised. But Russia has acquired the capability and willingness to engage into the war behind its borders. This is another Russia that is a source of threat.

¹ Putin's Munich Speech was made at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy held on February 10, 2007.

² <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-104e.html>

³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/russian/russia/newsid_7576000/7576028.stm

⁴ <http://www.coldwar.ru/bases/telegramm.php>

Shall the new 'Cold War' be expected?

In order to answer this question, the very definition of the 'Cold War' has to be unveiled. In essence, the 'Cold War' is not just about the 'cooling down' of the relationships between the countries. This is a global geopolitical, ideological, and economic confrontation between the blocks of states compounded by the arms race. A bipolar confrontation requires the existence two poles as such, a military parity, and ideological antagonism, or different values or political systems.

Currently there is an intensification of geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West largely on the basis of divergence of interests and values. Raised from the economic downturn, Russia attempts to extend its sphere-of-influence and to use effective levers of controls over the post-soviet space especially by using the abundance of energy resources. Besides that, Russia opposes itself to the 'democratic world' ruled by the US, thus leaving the right for its own way of development, which is different from the global trend propagated by the USA.

At the same time, Russia is not very economically and militarily strong enough to counteract to the United State and the NATO. According to the CIA World Factbook, in terms of per capita of Russia is placed on the 76th place in the world, while in the absolute terms it occupies the ninths place (the difference with the US GDP and EU GDP is sevenfold).⁵ In 2007, Russia's defense expenditures amounted to USD 35.⁴ bn, while the US spent as much as USD 547 bn and the UK – USD 59.7 bn.⁶ More fundamentally, in contrast to the US, Russia has virtually no allies to rely on in this global opposition. The war in Georgia reveals a relative uselessness of the CSTO both geopolitically and militarily. Even Belarus has been reluctant to support the actions of its Union State member.

Despite the differences in the geopolitical orientation of Russia and the West, there is no such divergence as in the course of the 'Cold War' number one. There is capitalist order in countries, McDonald's restaurants and similar consumption preferences and level of living habits. Besides that, Russia is strongly dependent on the West so a direct confrontation is very unlikely. The EU is the major destination for the exports of Russian energy goods. It means that Russia and Europe are interdependent since the pipeline has two ends. The so-called Stabilization Fund of Russia has been filled with the extra-profits obtained from gas exports. Physically, these funds are kept abroad at foreign banks. In fact, the direct confrontation could result in the freezing of these bank accounts. One can forecast that the EU and the US would avoid direct sanctions in this situation of interdependence. Nevertheless, it is possible to expect that the sides would downscale the cooperation in the area of technology transfer, that the investment flow to Russia would subside, and that Russian companies would not be allowed to purchase key assets in the West. The real cost of the conflict is the refusal of Russia to work on reducing the civilizational gap that still separates it and the West. In so doing, its long-term future still relies on oil and gas prices.

But while these prices are high, Russia is still trying to maintain its status of the great country via the aggressiveness in its former sphere-of-influence. Russia could conduct local wars, but it is hardly capable of withstanding the global confrontation with the US. Russia destroys legal regimes and makes resounding speeches, but its capabilities are compatible to a status of a state of regional, and not global, importance. The new 'Cold War' is not to come. In the worst-case scenario, Russia would merely become another outlaw state.

What Neighbors Shall Do?

Isolation of Russia will bring no good, but will rather enforced the distorted perception of the international politics by the Russian leadership, which will aggravate international situation, promote militarism authoritarianization of the internal political system. Russia, as we already noted, is not ready for the fullfledged cold war, but, as Georgia shows, is capable of carrying out local wars for territory and political influence. Russia's activities

⁵ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2001rank.html>

⁶ <http://www.arms-expo.ru/site.xp/049057054050124050054057051.html>

will be concentrated on the former Soviet republics. Some Western political and military analysts had already entered a guessing game about what can be the next object of Kremlin's harassment.

Russia's neighbors, however, were worried during the war not only because of the Kremlin's behavior but also because of the inaction of the Western allies of Saakashvili who failed to support Georgia when the Russian aviation bombed Gori and Poti. The reason for concern emerged not only for Ukraine but also for the Baltic NATO countries. Are the United States and the Western European countries ready to fight to defend Latvia and Estonia? It has to be remembered that NATO has no precedent, apart from 9/11, to put in use Article 5 of its Charter that guarantees collective defense to member states?⁷ Since the cost of such conflict would be too high for the entire West, there is a threat that interests of small allies could be sacrificed.

The council of national defense had been convened in Riga to reconsider relations with Russia and reassess the defense readiness of the country. Lithuania is more restrained in this respect, yet, some political forces, mostly conservatives, call to stop professionalization of the army and to come back to the concept of the territorial defense.⁸ But, even as the draft is back, Lithuania is far from being able to repel the possible Russian aggression.

Isolation of Russia will bring about the intensification of the geopolitical struggle for the post-Soviet space. In particular, the fight for Ukraine is ahead. United States and Russia both remember the old dictum by Zbigniew Brzezinski that Russia will never be an empire without Ukraine. The contest for Ukraine, unlike Georgia or Estonia, can be the beginning of a new global conflict.

Belarus may seem to be in the safest position among the Russia's neighbors due to its allied relations with Moscow. However, the conflict in Georgia forced even the official Minsk to think about its future. Nowadays, when the confrontation between Russia and the West reached its peak, Minsk will have to make a hard choice. Usual policy of balancing between two geopolitical giants is no longer adequate in this situation. The choice Belarus would make will define its future for many years. And this choice is not yet obvious. Why were the political prisoners released? Why the representative of State Department arrived to Minsk? Why Lukashenko is not in hurry to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia?

At the same time, there are words by the Belarusian president about the 'wise and beautiful' actions of the Russian army in Georgia⁹ and preparations to sign agreement on a single air defense system of Belarus and Russia. Russia is still a better option for Lukashenko than turn to the West and the necessity to carry out the reforms. However, as many of the hints he dropped in the recent days confirm, he is willing to keep his cards open.

Coming back to the security of Russia's immediate neighbors, one can outline several opportunities:

First, the non-NATO countries should use the opportunity to seek full-fledged membership in order to get certain security guarantees and at least let Russia think before it starts harassing or even attacking the alliance member;

Second, as even the NATO membership does not give full security guarantees, the countries in the region would increase common defense projects with the United States, even though this would immediately make them target for Russian missiles.

Third, countries of Eastern Europe can deepen political and military cooperation in the region that spreads through the territory of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This could be the solution the EU and NATO countries of the region (increasing their weight in the Euroatlantic structures) as well as for non-EU and NATO countries, as such step would establish indirect ties to these alliances and increase the geopolitical

⁷ <http://rus.postimees.ee/210808/glavnaja/estonija/39409.php>

⁸ <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1044932.html>

⁹ http://news.belta.by/ru/main_news?id=260409

weight of these countries. Even though Russia's threat is not as pressing for the region as to carry out such scenarios, there is an obvious upward trend in the North-South cooperation, as manifested by the intensification of relations between Lithuania, Ukraine, and Belarus.¹⁰

As for Belarus, its leaders, if they want to preserve the real independence of the country, will have to accept proposals of the EU and the United States and move towards rapprochement with Euroatlantic structures. Belarus, counterintuitively, does not have too many obstacles on this way, as it has no territorial disputes or ethnic conflicts, its economy is not in the worse shape than the one of Serbia, Albania, or even Bulgaria. Hence, the issue is only the civilization choice and political reforms, the issues that can be solved within one generation.

The Belarusian opposition will naturally oppose the intensification of contacts between Belarus and the West while the existing head of state keeps his position even if he authorizes some limited reform and economic liberalization on the moral grounds. Nevertheless, such position may be short-sighted and even detrimental for Belarus' national interests insofar as it can bring about the loss of a historic chance to get out of the Moscow's influence. Since politics is the art of possible, democratic forces would make a wise decision if they actively promote reorientation of Belarus even at the expense of the tactical alliance with Lukashenko. Legitimization of the regime is detrimental for the opposition but may be good for Belarus in these circumstances. Hence, such choice will test the ability by the Belarusian politicians to make strategic choices.

¹⁰ http://www.lfpr.lt/uploads/File/Current/No19_Melyantsou_RU.pdf